A murder at the border

A fantasy detective story

Symon Pude

Preface

This novelette is a fantasy story written in the form of a letter from an elf to her brother. In the work, she travels to the border of the queendom and has to help a certain detective to solve a murder.

I wish the reader to have fun trying to figure out the culprit.

Dearest Brother,

I have not forgotten my promise to tell you about the happenings in my life. I apologise for the sporadic manner that I have written stories in the last few years - there had not been much that was worth putting to parchment. That certainly has changed now.

If my latest letter has reached you well, you will know that I have finished my education as a healer at the royal academy in the capital. Only days after, I had received summons that I could not decline.

In the west, the tension with the orcish tribes beyond the border had grown to a dangerous level. There were reports that a horde had formed, and soon the queendom would find itself in the fourth orcish war.

To support the troops that were sent to the border, healers were brought to towns in the region. I was sent to Indino, a town only a few miles from the border, more to the south.

Indino was a simple town that was only in the process of implementing the modern amenities that were natural in the city: Only the main streets and some housing were provided with mage light, and most citizens still gathered their water from wells in buckets. Surrounding the town was a stone wall, though I couldn't understand where they had gathered enough stone for that task, as the western lands consisted of rolling hills with great plains, and some dotted forests.

The same day I arrived there, an unexpected message came in. Evaine and her envoy were able to form a trade treaty with the orcish chieftains that was mutually beneficial to both sides. As expected from the crown princess. The war was over before it had even begun.

Of course, this was cause for celebration. The entire town did not sleep much that night, the ale flowed out of the kegs in the taverns. There was talk about a new trade route with the orc settlements that would go directly through Indino, bringing in business that they had never seen. There were some critical voices here and there, mostly from old folk that might have fought in the third orcish war, but the overall vibe was positive.

I was not in the mood to celebrate. Certainly, I was happy that everything was settled without needless violence, however, this all

came at an quite inopportune moment.

It would be difficult to find work as a healer in the capital without hands-on experience, and I would leave again the next day, with no opportunity to show my skills.

But I wouldn't be defeated so easily. I rose early the next day, the town still in a deep slumber from yesterday's excess. I sought out the makeshift magistrate tent; in there, it was bustling already this early in the morning. On each desk, there was an imp, scribbling away with their tiny, grey hands. The message about the treaty, and further information, had to be sent in many directions; and you know how eager imps are with replicating the written word.

I walked up to the main desk, staffed by two imps with little differences, and presented my name as Hendralica and my case. I figured that there was a lack of healers in this border region, and maybe I could extend my stay and help them, thus getting experience. I came there, because all the information passed through this office.

"We do not know of any patients that need a healer," the first imp said with their distinct high-pitched voice.

"...a healer," the second echoed.

I remained insistent, "Please, can you check again?"

"Check again!"

"Check again!"

The first imp caught himself, impressively. Normally, it is hard for an imp to resist digging through letters again.

"No, we shan't. Important work to do."

"... to do," the second imp added with a sad voice.

I turned around, defeated.

Just then, a third imp approached, with an envelope in hand. "Wait, we have received a letter."

"...a letter."

"...a letter."

I tried not to get too excited, it wasn't sure at this point if this letter would be something that helped me, the odds were against it. Little did I know how much this letter would change my life.

The first imp took the parchment from the other, and skimmed through it. "Yes, yes, someone is calling for a doctor."

"...a doctor?"

"...a doctor."

“That’s a strange word,” I said.

“It is a term for a magicless human known in the arts of healing. Redundant now with academy taught healers.”

“...healers.”

“...healers.”

I continued, “It might still be relevant to me. It's likely there is someone who doesn't know the correct word.”

“Should we read you the letter?”

“...letter.”

“...letter.”

I politely refused to hear it three times at once, so I elected to read it myself.

It was hard to read, some letters looked like they were written by someone who had just recently learned to write.

“*To the magistrate of this region,*

There is need for a physician in the village of Grenald. It is a matter of life and death; I beg the Madams or Sirs to send a doctor post haste.

I also employ you to deliver a package of tobacco with your employ.

Yours faithfully,

SH”

“Grenald,” I read. “Is it far?”

“About a day's journey by cart.”

“...cart.”

“...cart.”

“Has there been a healer dispatched to there already?”

“No,” the third imp said. “This letter has come by owl from Severns. No official channel, no known sender. According to the rules, the letter has not been considered legit for magistrate matters.”

“...matters.”

“...matters.”

I put my foot down. “But if it is true, and this is a matter of life and death, one has to heed the call.”

“We cannot decide this.”

“...this.”

“...this.”

But I knew who could. I was allowed to take the letter and brought it straight to the mayor’s house, where the general

overseeing the military operation had taken residence. And you wouldn't believe it: it was Garrett. He had bags under his eyes, and he seemed in pain from a headache, yet he tried his best to talk to me in high spirits. I cut our catching up short, and came directly to the matter of the letter. He wanted to organise a chariot to get me there, but I refused, urging him not to give me any special treatment. And so he only gave me a short writing on parchment that allowed me to join the messenger cart that was going to be sent out soon, to inform the populace about the peace with the orcs. As thanks, I alleviated his headache a bit, though not completely - he still had to learn the consequences of his actions.

There was only enough time left to pack my essentials, then visit the only tobacco shop in town, led by a stout, short man with a full beard. He might have been the only one with dwarven blood in Indino.

The cart with two royal soldiers was already rolling when I came to it. I stopped it and presented the parchment from Garrett.

The two soldiers introduced themselves as Jeralt, an experienced knight that was 45 winters old, which is middle age for humans, and Seral, a trainee close to his knightening, not yet having reached his 30th, and still filled with youthful elan.

The cart they were using was normally used for supply runs or trading, so it had a tented loading area, which was almost empty now and there was enough space for me to comfortably sit. In front of the cart, two unicorn mules were pitched.

The animals pulled with determination, through the sights of the region. I need to return there in spring; the expansive plains must look wonderful dotted with flowers, and the occasional poppy fields would have been beautiful if the petals hadn't fallen off yet.

When night fell, we still hadn't reached the village, so we set up camp close to a river.

Despite my objections, the two soldiers insisted that I should spend the night in the cart, while they slept outside.

Before that, however, they gathered firewood for a bonfire to prepare a stew.

While it was cooking, Jeralt handed me a felted cap.

“To hide your ears,” the older man said. “The only interaction the villagers around this part have had with non-humans are orcish raiders, and to avoid any hostility, it's best to hide the sharp tips. You can pass a human healer like this.”

Seral scoffed. “Quite a young healer.”

I took the cap from the older man, thanking him, then the younger continued, “I find it amazing that you're already a healer at your age.”

Jeralt looked at him. “How old do you think Lady Hendralica is?”

“I’m not a dolt,” Seral answered. “I know that folk of elven blood look deceptively young. She looks like she only just reached adulthood, so she's probably only a few years older than me.”

Jeralt turned to me. “How old are you?”

“I recently crossed 63 winters,” I said.

Seral’s eyes widened. “63? You're older than my da!”

I nodded, showing nothing of the fact that I was likely older than his grand-da in actuality.

In the morning, we continued and reached the village at about noon. On our approach, we passed some lonely farms, and the people out and about had an air of grieving and distrust around them. The village centre was a collection of a few more houses, but it was surrounded again by farms. While Indino had some luxuries of modern living, Grenald had none of them. The most glaring object in the village was a gibbet in the middle of the square, next to an old masonry.

As soon as we arrived, a woman ran up and wanted to speak to the soldiers for a matter of law.

Jeralt was reluctant to leave me alone, but I assured him I would be fine, indicating the cap he had given me.

The two soldiers went with the woman to a collection of houses a bit off, and I talked to an old woman that was currently picking weeds. They knew nothing of a patient that would have needed my help, so I instead asked for a man with the initials SH. She indicated a small shed standing free in the distance.

I thanked her and walked there. The windows have been boarded up. I knocked on the door, but no answer. So I opened it.

I found a dark room, even my elven eyes needed a moment to snap to the new lighting conditions. There were certain farming tools stored, though they had been put aside to the corners and walls. In the middle of the room, there was a stand with a piece of glass fixed on top.

“Enter or stay out, but do close the door,” came a male voice

from the corner that I haven't seen yet. It had a strange inflection, his pronunciation unlike any I'd heard before.

Without much thinking, I entered and closed the door like he wanted. The room was now plunged into darkness, except for a ray of sunlight getting in through a small pinhole in the barred up window. The ray hit the piece of glass in the middle, and from it, it threw the colours of the rainbow against the far wall. Now I also saw that there were some words written on the wall with coal: labels for the colours that were shown. The spelling was weird.

The unseen man plugged the hole in the window. Now it was properly dark until the crystal of a magelight switched on at the same point where the pinhole had been. Again, colours were thrown against the far wall, though it was not a continuous rainbow, but broad lines of the principle colours of magic; violet, blue, green, yellow, red. The colours coincided with the labels. In the academy, we had some lectures about the nature of magic, but I had never seen such a simple show.

"It's interesting, isn't it?" the man said. "Even the most powerful electrical lights produce a spectrum, and that only to a certain wavelength. Yet this simple crystal can create such distinct lines and appear white."

Still in amazement at the sight, I was caught completely unaware when he suddenly grabbed the crystal and was upon me. He held the light close, staring at my face only a foot apart.

My heart remained calm - I had not forgotten my years of training. Even if he tried to fall over me like a savage, he would not get far.

But he didn't go any further. His dark eyes darted around, taking in every detail of my face. As such, I also had my first good look at him. A lanky man, aged somewhere between Jeralt and Seral. His clothes were strange; a buttoned shirt that was tugged into trousers at his waist. It all looked high quality, like it had been made by a pixie seamstress in the capital.

"How peculiar," he said after a while and stepped back again. "Where are my manners? Sherlock Holmes, at your service." He gave a courteous bow with his introduction.

For a moment, I didn't know what to say. The man opened the door to let in some light, then gathered a brown jacket that was also shorter than a tunic.

"May I ask what the lady's name is?" he asked, which finally

broke my stupor.

“Hendralica,” I said.

Sherlock scoffed and put a strange cap on his head. “You know, if you are using a fake name, I’d prefer you’d take one with two syllables as a maximum. Something like… Watson.” He nodded to himself. “Yes, I guess that could work. Come on, then.”

He marched out of the shed, and I had no chance but to hurry after him.

“Have you been a doctor for long? Do you have experience with dead bodies?” he asked when I caught up.

“We had examined some at the academy, but this is my first practice in the field,” I said, and posed a counter question. “How do you even know that I was a healer?”

“Elementary, my dear Watson. I sent for a healer, as you seem to call it, and the estimated time of arrival coincided with your appearance. This, and your uniform looks utilitaristic for working with blood.”

“My name's not Watson, it's Hendralica,” I pouted.

“Forgive me, Lady, I will not remember this fake name of yours. I cannot have my mind cluttered with things like that,” he said. “Besides, it is of no concern right now, there is work to do.”

“Right,” I said, happy to shift focus on healing again. “You have mentioned a patient in your letter, where are they?”

Sherlock marched further. “I have not mentioned any patient in my writing, for there is none.”

“What? But I could have sworn…”

“I merely stated that there is need for a healer, and that it is a matter of life and death. I don't fault you for thinking there is a patient, since this is easily falsely inferred by normal minds.”

Anger welled up in me; I came all this way for nothing. “Then why have you even called me here?”

“Because there has been a murder. And they wouldn't let me, an outsider, look at the corpse or even the suspect. But they would be ready to show me to the victim if there was a doctor present, thus my letter to you.”

I was furious to be tricked into such a singular purpose. “Who is the suspect?”

“An [orc]. Who will be executed today.” Now, he did not say orc, but a very inappropriate term for them from backwater regions, which I won't write here for obvious reasons. He seemed oblivious

that it was such a bad word, but upon my reaction, I believe he realised it.

“This is bad,” I said then. “The queendom has made peace with the orcs, and this murder shakes this truce.”

“A good thing that the young orc did not do it, then.”

“What? How can you be sure?”

“It will make itself clear.”

We approached the collection of houses that Jeralt and Seral had been led to. There were four houses almost connected in a U-shape with a shared courtyard in the middle, and a barn in the back. In front, there were the woman from before, the knight and the knave, as well as an old human with a walking stick. Behind the old man, there stood a young man, which might have been an aid for him. I also spotted three children, a boy and two girls, who were watching the conversation from the side. The two smaller ones hid behind the oldest, who must've been on the cusp of adulthood.

When Sherlock approached the conversation, the old man’s expression soured even further. Sherlock ignored him at first to greet the soldiers.

“You must be the constables around this part, it is good for you to be here. Sherlock Holmes, detective, at your service.”

The strange man gave a short bow. In response, Seral and Jeralt put their fist over their chests.

“Seral, Knave of the Queendom."

“Jeralt, Knight of the Queendom,” the older of the two said. “You said you were a what? Detective?”

“Yes, I investigate crimes and use deduction to bring the criminal to justice.”

“So, almost like an investigator.”

“I do apologise,” Sherlock said, courteously. “Yes, like an investigator. Some of my expressions might be a little foreign.”

“No matter, I am glad you are here,” Jeralt said. “Mayor Durn here was just telling us about a case that might need investigation.”

The old man with the walking stick scoffed. “There is no need for any investigation, the matter is clear as day.”

“Why don't you explain it again, so Watson here can make herself a picture as well.” Sherlock took a step to the side, and I had no other chance but to integrate myself in the circle. For some reason, my hair stood on end.

“My name is Hendralica,” I said.

“I loathe to repeat myself,” Mayor Durn said with a full voice. “But if that is what is needed to finish this matter once and for all…

“It is a tragedy; our dear friend Dahlia has been murdered by a young [orc],...” - again the bad word - “...three days ago at dusk. Everybody liked Dahlia; she was strong, competent and fun to be around. She was the daughter of our late baker, and she continued his work on her own perfectly. Which was one reason that I put her in charge of overseeing Grenald’s grain and produce storages, and over time it became clear that she was the best candidate as my successor as mayor.” He made a cough that went deep in his chest. “As you can see, my health is not the best.”

“Certainly,” Sherlock answered. “Can you give us more detail on what exactly happened?”

“The night was starting to get quite dark, I was just getting ready for bed, when I heard a crash and commotion outside. Felix and Tarnik managed to catch the young [orc] trying to run. We then found Dahlia with a knife in her stomach, lying in the grass. The knife was a typical [orcish] knife.”

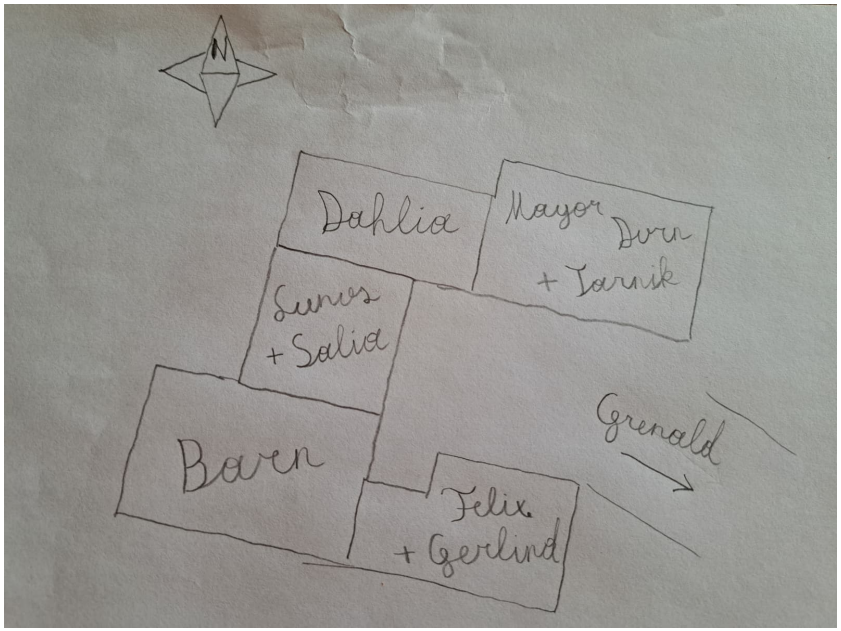
“Felix?” I asked, then glanced at the young aide behind him.

“No, no,” the old man shook his head. “My helper’s name is Tarnik , Felix is the new father in the farmer house of our commune.”

“It might be a good idea to explain who else lives here in these houses, for Watson, the knight and the knave.”

“I don't see any reason to,” Mayor Durn said. “It is quite clear that the captured [orc] is the murderer…”

“My name is Salia, I’m the mother from the middle house,” the woman in the circle interrupted the mayor. “My three children, Sofia, Finn and Melia are also here. My husband Lunus is currently in Indino or on his way back, the one o the right of ours house belonged to Dahlia alone, the mayor lives on the right, his current aide, Tarnik, is staying with him. Finally, on the very left there is the house of my brother Felix, his wife Gerlind and their healthy baby boy Fillin.”



I nodded at the information that Salia so graciously provided, and I also looked at her a bit closer. Her incisors were a bit sharp, and her eyes quite reflective. She might have some beastkin blood, though diluted.

The mayor was not too happy with the interruption and continued with a grumpy voice, “ In accordance with the queen’s law, the [orc] had been given a grace period of three days, which expired today. Within this time, no evidence to prove his innocence has come forward, therefore he is to be executed.”

“No evidence so far,” Sherlock said. “The sun is still up, there is still time. The matter would have been resolved already, if I had been allowed to help.”

“You're a stranger,” the mayor said. “I cannot allow you to see the dead out of respect for us dear to her.”

“... unless I was accompanied by a doctor,” Sherlock said and indicated me again. “Now with one present, there should be nothing that prevents me.”

“It still makes me feel uneasy,” the mayor said.

Jeralt jumped in. “I’m sure Miss Hendralica will make sure Dahlia’s body is treated with the utmost respect.”

The mayor took a deep breath, which caused him to cough

again. “Ok. But I will join you.”

“Actually,” Sherlock said. “There is not enough time left to dilly-dally. If it is okay with you, I would prefer you take our representatives of law to your suspect, while Watson and I examine the body. Salia can guide us to where we have to go.”

The mayor seemed unhappy with this arrangement, but upon insistence by Jeralt that this was an acceptable cause of action, he conceded.

So Sherlock and I went with the woman with beastkin blood.

Wasting no time, the strange man asked Salia while walking, “So, your husband is on a trip to Indino to sell the game you have hunted?”

“Yes, that is correct,” Salia said. “He is a well known hunter, and selling them provides a living for our family.”

“Then it must've been difficult now that your recent hunts have not been as successful as usual.”

Salia furrowed her brows. “How do you know that?”

Sherlock made a dismissive gesture. “Never mind that. Your husband surely does not return back with an empty cart.”

“Of course not; else there are a lot of things we don't have access to; salt, spices, light crystals,...”

“Certainly, certainly; and the things he brings back are not just for your family, but for the whole settlement.”

“Correct.”

We had reached the entrance to the dead woman's house, but Sherlock asked one last statement, “The things he should bring are organised by Dahlia, as the one who looks after the stores.”

“Yes,” Salia said. “I will not go in; I cannot bear seeing her dead body. She should be inside the bedroom.”

We respected her wishes and entered. The place was frugal, but it contained everything one needed. A table and cupboards with *surprisingly* silver cutlery, a place to do repairs on clothes. A large chest with a lock stood in the corner. There were two doors leading from the centre room. The right led to a simple work room with a wood oven and a hearth connected to the chimney. This is where she would make bread, there were still loaves around that had turned sour because they hadn't been baked.

The bakery shared a wall with the room behind the other door, which turned out to be the bedroom. Residual warmth from the cooking fire would make the temperature bearable for sleep.

In said bedroom we found the dead body covered with a sheet. Sherlock peeled it back to reveal the body of a heavy-set woman that had already started to bloat. I put the sleeve of my tunic over my nose against the stench. Sherlock didn't seem too affected and he got closer, taking in every detail of the dead body. He took only little interest in the hole in her shirt, which was rounded by a small circular blood stain that had turned brown.

“What are your thoughts, Watson?” Sherlock suddenly asked.

“Hendralica,” I said, correcting him, though it seemed useless. “And I’m not sure what I should do here. She is dead and I neither can, nor am I allowed to bring her back to life.”

“Why yes, I’m not asking you to undo what had been done. No, I’m asking you as a doctor. You must've encountered a few dead bodies in your profession or at least in your education.”

Sherlock was right, we had seen some at the academy, though I had seen more in my years before.

He continued, “As such, I implore you to make some observations on this body. For example, how did she die?”

I stepped closer against the smell and looked at Dahlia.

“Likely cause of death, stab wound in the chest,” I said, then narrowed my eyes. “Though, that is very little blood.”

“And also, blood is affected by gravity. If she was stabbed while standing, we would see a trail of blood downwards.”

“So that could mean that she was tackled to the ground before being stabbed.”

“A possibility, though I rejected it due to the amount of blood, and there was no scream. No, this was done after death.”

“So how did she die?” I asked.

“I do not want to influence your expert opinion,” Sherlock said. “I merely ask you to take a closer look at the shoulders and upwards.”

At first, I didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Some blue and black spots have started to appear on her dead skin, though then I noticed that the spots formed a pattern on her throat; like two hands.

“She was strangulated,” I said.

“Yes, the marks are fading, but still visible. They haven't noticed them before, because they were convinced that the knife was the cause of death and didn’t look further,” Sherlock said. “She was murdered in this very room.”

“How do you know that?”

“Dahlia was a baker, and a baker’s day starts early. As such, she retires to her room much earlier than others. There is little reason for her to be outside at dusk.”

I nodded to myself; what Sherlock said seemed simple once one thought about it.

Sherlock continued, “We are searching for a large and strong person with skin of about the same complexion as most villagers I met here in Grenald, and scratches on their left arm.”

“I do understand that it must be a large person because the strangulation marks are quite big, but why the other things?”

“I commend your own deductions, Watson. It had to be a strong person who was able to carry her body outside. As for the other deductions…” Before I could react, Sherlock lay himself into the bed beside the dead woman, where there was just enough space for him.

“Hm, more comfortable than I thought,” he said. “Now, strangle me.”

“What?”

“Do just pretend to.”

He left me no choice but to do as he asked. I stepped closer and put my hands on his throat, without any pressure. (I have to make clear that I had to take my sleeve from my nose, and so the smell got into my nose.)

“Great,” Sherlock said. “I have been sleeping, and now I’m being strangled. That is enough to rip me from sleep.” Sherlock put his hands on my wrists. “I try to remove the hands, but my opponent is too strong. I panic and try to attack them in any way possible.” He reached with his right hand and pretended to scratch my arm.

I understood. “She scratched her attacker.”

“That's right.” Sherlock jumped up. “And their skin is still under her nails.”

He took out a white tissue cloth and placed it under the dead’s right hand.

He produced a wooden splinter and used it to scrape under Dahlia’s nails. The dirt came out and landed on the cloth.

He held it up to me. “See?”

I squinted to look closer; it was hard to determine the real colour, but it definitely was not green.

“The orc didn't do it,” I said.

“Correct, Watson.”

“Hendralica,” I said, almost as a reflex.

“Good.” Sherlock completely ignored me as he put the sheet back over Dahlia's body and made for the door. “There should still be some time until they finish interrogating the innocent suspect. Enough time for us to speak to one witness.”

We walked back out into the courtyard, and I thought he would go straight to whatever witness he had meant, but instead he stopped by a bench in the sunlight.

“By the way, Watson, were you able to bring tobacco?”

“Yes,” I replied, producing the package from my beltbag.

Sherlock took it and brought it up to his nose. “That certainly is tobacco, strong one at that,” he decided. “Which in and of itself is interesting.”

He took out a long wooden pipe and stuffed some of the tobacco in its compartment. I looked around to see if there was any open flame or at least embers that might help him ignite, but as I turned back, smoke already trailed from the pipe. He pocketed a small box; at the moment, I was a bit confused; I didn't know there were sparkstones as small and safe enough to fit in such a box, and how did Sherlock get a hold of them?

I didn't press the issue, but let him enjoy the smoke, which seemed to calm him a bit, but his eyes stayed alert.

I asked, “Why were you so certain that the orc was innocent? Yes, we now found evidence that suggests someone else is to blame, but why did you believe it beforehand?”

Sherlock breathed out a ring of smoke. “I am telling you something about the practice of a detective: In most cases, we work on consultation, as was the case this time as well. And I’m inclined to believe my clients.”

“Who are your clients?”

“That will make itself apparent before the end, until then, it is of no concern.”

Sherlock finished his smoke, and then he tapped out the ash onto the bench. He knelt down, examining it as if it was the most interesting thing in the world. “Hm, a bit more coarse than Indian cush, certainly something I haven't seen before.”

Just then, a man walked out of the adjacent barn towards the door of the house to the left. From the similar beastkin characteristics as Salia, I identified him as Felix, her brother. He

wore a rather new, long sleeved tunic that was almost a bit much for the late spring day. I tapped Sherlock's shoulder, and he interrupted the investigation of the ashes.

“Ah, our witness.” With big strides, he walked to intercept Felix.

The man stopped and took a few steps backwards, his ears twitching. “What do you want?”

“Apologies for this attack, but we have to speak to you for the sake of an innocent life. My name is…”

“I know who you are,” the man cut him off. “You're the weird stranger that appeared a week ago, and who stoops into things that aren't his business.”

“...whose name is Sherlock Holmes,” Sherlock said. “Pleased to formally make your acquaintance. This is Watson, a healer from the capital.”

“My name is Hendralica,” I said, setting the record straight. I felt a little irritation towards Sherlock, also because I have never told him I was from the capital. But I swallowed it down to try to convince Felix to cooperate. I produced the badge from my belt pocket to prove my status as a healer, upon which, the man with beastkin blood relaxed so much that his ears stopped twitching.

“We have examined Dahlia’s body,” I continued. “We found some evidence that points to the young orc not being the murderer.”

“What?” Felix said instinctively, then toned down. “I’m sorry, Lady Hendralica, but I fear this man has caught you in his wild theories. Dahlia intercepted the thief and he killed her in turn. There's nothing more to it. I have seen him holding the knife!”

“Holding, or using it?” Sherlock asked.

“He was kneeling over her dead body!”

“Ah, dead. So she did not show any signs of life?”

“She had a knife in her chest, of course she was dead.”

“But you said that the orc was holding the knife just now, so what was it; was it in his hands or in her chest?”

That gave Felix a short pause. “In his hand, I think. No, wait. He pulled it out just as came there.”

“Has the possibility occurred to you that he has removed the knife to try and help her?”

“Preposterous.”

“Is it? I proclaim that *your* version of the

incident is preposterous. Say, Watson, you have seen the wound on Dahlia's chest, and you are a healer. How long would you say a person shows signs of life after such a stabbing?"

I thought for a moment, then said, "A few minutes at least."

"Exactly. And, as Felix said, she didn't show any signs of life anymore. Now, imagine you're illegally in a foreign land, and you have just stabbed someone, what would be your first instinct?"

Felix turned his head. "To run away."

"Exactly. Certainly not to wait for minutes and risk being discovered."

"That doesn't mean he's innocent," Felix looked at them again. "Maybe he had killed her before and then came back for the knife."

"I do not find this likely either. What alerted you to get outside?"

"A crash of barrels that were stacked up, the orc must've accidentally knocked them over."

"And even after making such a loud noise, he still chose to go for the knife? That does sound unlikely."

"Maybe the knife was too important for him," Feix said, still not stepping from his convictions.

"Ah," Sherlock said. "I anticipated this small point of doubt. That is why I wanted to see Dahlia's body first to confirm my suspicions. Watson, can you tell Mister Felix what we have found?"

"Dahlia was likely strangulated, and the knife wound was added after death."

Felix widened his eyes. "Are you sure?" His eyes started twitching again, though differently this time. I assumed it was fear.

"Quite so," Sherlock said. "The real murderer was likely a strong person of similar complexion to you."

Silence spread between the three of us. For a few moments, no one spoke. Felix looked from Sherlock to me and back.

"Are you saying that I killed Dahlia?" Felix said, anger in his voice.

Sherlock continued with a calm voice. "Despite you being the prime suspect now, I do not think so, or I would have handled this conversation differently."

"Prime suspect? Why me?"

“You were the one to discover Dahlia. How are we to know it did happen as you say?”

“I had no reason to kill her!” Felix showed his sharp teeth, like a cat hissing.

“Incorrect,” Sherlock said. “If we go back to the barn, would we not find Dahlia's cart loaded with your, and your wife’s belongings?”

That gave Felix pause. “How did you…”

“Your clothes are too clean for you to have tended to the animals or do some repairs right now, which makes the options of what you were doing in the barn instead quite limited,” Sherlock began. “It is a sensible decision to want to leave the border region; you have a suckling to take care of, and the talks of a war get louder and louder. But you need a carriage that can make the journey. Your brother-in-law's cart is currently in use, so you instead asked Dahlia, but she refused.”

Felix grumbled. “That is correct, but she understood us wanting to leave and so she gave me coins to get a cart in another way, and to ease our settling somewhere else for a time.”

“And how many coins did she give you?”

“10 silvers.”

I raised my eyebrows at this. If you are missing context, brother, this kind of money would have been enough to cover three months of my stay at the dormitory. For a farmer this is quite the large sum.

Sherlock scratched his chin. “Silver? Curious. May we ask to see those coins? And maybe talk to your wife as well? I’m sure she can confirm you were with her when the incident happened.”

Felix didn't say anything for a few moments, then he said, somewhat reluctantly, I guess, “For a short moment, yes.”

Sherlock clasped his hands. “Splendid. Now, I do have a few questions before we head in. Where were the barrels that were thrown over?”

“Right over there,” Felix pointed towards the Mayor's house. “Tarnik cleared the empty ones out of the cellar.”

“When?”

“I guess the same day it happened.”

“Hm. And the last question: Was Dahlia still warm when you carried her off?”

Felix swallowed. “Yes.”

I jumped in with a question of my own. Have you noticed marks

on her throat?"

"No, I haven't," Felix said, clearly uncomfortable with these questions.

"Enough of that," Sherlock said. "You have been a great help, now let's meet your lovely wife."

We entered the small house with low roofs and found her looking out the window. Gerlind was a well-set woman, but the birth had taken a toll on her, and she still needed some time to recuperate. When the whole thing was explained to her, she confirmed that Felix was with her right after finishing up at the barn. When asked about the plan to leave Grenald, she said that both of them agreed that they should go. It would be hard on her and Fillin, but she was willing to do it for their safety.

At that point, I remembered that they likely hadn't heard of the peace with the orcs yet, so I told them.

Gerlind pressed her child harder to her chest. "Then more of those murderers will come."

"The orc is innocent," Sherlock threw in. He gave a short and precise overview of what they had found. At the more grueling parts, Gerlind gasped, but Sherlock simply continued. He ended it with, "And we wondered whether you saw anything or anyone on that night."

Gerlind shook her head. "No, I haven't been paying attention to what happened outside."

"Hm," Sherlock mused. "I do remind you that the real murderer is still free and a danger to your child. Speak the truth, so we can find him."

"I…" Gerlind stuttered, then gave in. "I was watching the road towards the village centre in the evening."

"To see if you can spot the old peddler from whom your husband purchased an old cart, and who promised he would bring it to you on that day."

Gerlind simply nodded.

Sherlock walked a few steps and crouched down a bit. "So, this was about your view, correct?"

Another nod.

"Have you seen anyone?"

"No…wait, yes. Tarnik walked by, just before the sun started to set. Nothing unusual."

"And he came from the mayor's house?"

“Yes.”

“This next question is very important. Did he carry anything?”

“I… maybe he was carrying flowers?”

“No bucket?”

“No.”

Felix jumped in. “You think Tarnik did it?”

“Felix!” Gerlind berated him.

“It would make sense; what do we really know about him? He only came here a month ago.”

“But he seems like such an honest and hard working young man, he had a difficult time coming up and I can tell that he does his best not to waste this opportunity.”

“It could be all lies,” Felix said.

Sherlock cooled the argument down. “Let's not run away with unsupported theories. It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgment. Felix, can you show me the coins that Dahlia gave you?”

Felix went to one of the drawers and took out a pouch. He walked over and put the eight silver coins on the table. Sherlock took one and mustered it under the light from the window.

“Watson, what is your opinion? I must admit I am not well versed in the currency of this region.”

I took another one of the coins and looked at it more closely. It had been a while since I had seen such coins in such good condition. They were minced before the Queen’s third Confidentium according to the engraving. When I told Sherlock about it, he raised his eyebrows. “Curious.”

We put the coins back and Felix immediately put them back in their proper place. The man had finally taken off his tunic, and I froze when I saw three scratches on his arm. I tapped Sherlock and tried to indicate it without being too obvious.

Sherlock went without haste, to Gerlind and the baby on her arm. “Fillin was it, right?”

Gerlind confirmed, and I tried not to show my irritation that he remembered the child’s name, but somehow not mine.

Sherlock continued, “He must be the age now when he starts to scratch.”

Gerlind laughed. “Yes, that is right.”

I pursed my lips; of course Felix’s scratches had an innocent explanation.

“Well then,” Sherlock said. “I believe we have all that we need. I thank you for your hospitality, we should quicken to save the innocent.”

After my insistence to get Gerlind some healing for her pains after childbirth, Sherlock headed out first.

The woman was all smiles when I was finished. She immediately started moving around more, though I advised her to start slowly. It made me happy that I was needed beyond the purpose that Sherlock had used me for.

When I got out, Sherlock had gathered Salia and her children, who were apparently going to accompany us to where the young orc was held.

Sherlock went in front with big steps, and Salia’s family and I had to hurry after him.

When I caught up, I asked him, “How did you know the scratches were made by the baby and not Dahlia.”

“They were too close together and the angle was off,” Sherlock said. “I’m sure you have seen it, but you have not observed it. Never let your expectations cloud your deductions.”

“And how did you know that the old peddler was supposed to bring the cart on the day of the murder?”

“Oh, quite easily, I have asked him,” Sherlock said. “I didn't sit idly by until you arrived, Watson.”

Before long we came to the centre of the village. Our destination was the old masonry on the village square. It may have been built in the second orcish war to hold enemy combatants. The first room we entered was the guard room. The cells were behind a sturdy looking door at the other side of the spacious room. (It might have held sleeping arrangements for the guards before.) The mayor, Tarnik, Jeralt, and Seral sat at a table in the corner.

“Is that the knife?” Before anyone could say anything, Sherlock took the knife lying on the table.

“Yes,” Jeralt said. The older knight had a sour expression on his face. “Our suspect denies that it is his, but it is clearly orcish made, I have seen these types of knives before.”

“Hm, silver. Interesting,” Sherlock said while investigating the knife. Then he handed it to me. “What do you think?”

The knife was about as long as my forearm with a silver blade and a warg leather hilt. Thin ropes were wrapped around the hilt, and they ended in tassels.

“Like Jeralt said; orcish make,” I said and put it back on the table.

“That I don't doubt, but I wondered if you knew more about its purpose.”

“It's a knife, its purpose is quite clear,” Mayor Durn said.

“So you think.” Sherlock switched the topic. “What did your suspect say?”

“Although he denies it, there is little doubt that he did it,” Jeralt said. I heard a sharp inhale from Salia’s boy.

The knight continued, “He said he saw the dead woman with a knife in her chest, and he tried to help her. When asked what he was doing in Grenald, he refused to say anything more.”

“Ah, loyal to a fault, not knowing that not saying anything is to his own detriment. That is a problem deeply ingrained in this case. To find the real culprit, and to save an innocent person, I advise all the ones holding back information not to do so any longer.”

He let the words settle, yet no one seemed to think what he said applied to them.

Mayor Durn was the first to speak up, “Innocent person? You heard the knight of the Queendom. He agrees that the [orc] is to blame.”

“Mayor, I am asking you to stop referring to our subject by that word,” Jeralt said, but the mayor only scoffed.

“What have you found out?” Seral asked to bring the conversation back on track.

Sherlock turned to me. “Watson, can you tell them what we found?”

I took a deep breath. “We found marks on her body that suggest Dahlia was strangulated first and only then stabbed. The person who killed her must be quite strong, since they likely have moved her after death. We found skin under her nails, so she likely scratched her attacker. The skin was not green.”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows in a confusion that seemed rare to him. “Green?”

The mayor scoffed again. “And now you want us to scour through every strong man in Grenald to find your elusive murderer.”

Sherlock said, “Why, that would be quite unnecessary, for I will prove no one else has approached or left your collection of houses that night.”

Salia pursed her lips. “You think it is one of our neighbours. But the only ones that can be described as strong enough are Felix and Tarnik.”

On hearing his name, the young man at the table seemed to shrink.

“Oh, I concur; if we were going simply by physical ability, I would include other people, like you…”

Salia cut him off. “Me?”

“Mister Holmes,” Jeralt said. “It would not bring us far to sling around accusations.”

“Not accusations; observations. Salia would be strong enough to move Dahlia, I’m quite sure it wouldn't have been the first time she moved something dead.”

Salia remained quiet.

Sherlock continued, “But alas, she was not even home when it happened.”

“What do you mean, of course I was home,” she complained.

“As I said before, to save an innocent life, you will have to be open with us. I will get back to that,” Sherlock said. “On that fateful day, Gerlind observed the road to Grenald from the houses, and she happened to see Tarnik pass by, heading from the houses to the right.”

The young man shrunk even further, now looking more like a child who got caught.

“I was fetching water from the brook,” he said with a meek voice.

“Gerlind was quite sure you were not carrying a bucket, so it would have been hard for you to fetch water. Now, tell us, what were you actually doing so late?”

The young man tried to speak, but nothing came out, the gazes of the people around the table boring into him.

“Tarnik,” Jeralt said. “Did you kill Dahlia?”

“He most certainly did not,” Sherlock said. “But, boy, you need to come clean.”

Tarnik looked around, and his view fell on Salia’s eldest daughter. His cheeks reddened and he said, “I got a note from Sofia that said to meet her by the cope at sundown.”

“What?” The older girl said, “I did not write any note.”

“What? But…” Tarnik said.

“Do you still have the note?” Jeralt asked.

“No,” Tarnik said. “I kept it in my room, but then it was suddenly gone.”

“You realise we cannot trust you on that,” the older knight said.

“But it is true. I was at the cope waiting for her when I heard the crash and I hurried back to see what it was.”

“Or, once you crossed Gerlind’s window, you circled around the house to get to Dahlia and strangulate her. Then you saw the orc and got the idea to blame it on him.”

“I… I…” the young man stuttered.

“That is ridiculous,” the mayor said. “I trust Tarnik with my life, he would not kill anyone. How would Tarnik even get the [orcish] knife? Even if Dahlia was strangulated and not stabbed, that doesn't mean that the [orc] did not do it. The skin under her nails could have come from an unrelated incident. Are we even sure it's even skin and not dirt? It is much more believable that the foreign burglar is to blame.”

“I only agree with the first part, Tarnik did not kill her,” Sherlock said. “For one, if he had circled anti-clockwise around the houses instead, the distance would be much shorter, and there would be less chance of being observed.”

Seral offered, “Maybe he wanted to be seen, to make it look like he was at the other side.”

“A valid point of contention,” Sherlock said. “But we can prove that he has not crossed the back of the houses.” He turned to Salia. “Now would be the time to reveal what you have been doing this evening.”

“I was at home sewing,” Salia answered.

Sherlock sighed. “I believe you make sensible decisions, so do make one now, before I reveal it for you.”

Salia remained quiet, so Sherlock continued, “I found it a bit odd that your husband, the famous hunter, would leave for several days, in which he wouldn't be able to hunt and provide for his family in that way. In the apparent absence of rifles in this region, the most likely weapon for hunting would be a bow, and holding the bowstring can create callouses on the index, middle and ring finger. Just like the ones I noticed on your right hand.”

Salia hid her hands behind her back.

“And three days ago, you were hunting. The evening shows some migration of game, so it is a good time to hunt. Now, I presume you normally seek out a hunting spot close to a watering hole south-

west of here, but recently, you moved to a different spot, which is not as good for hunting: Right at the edge of the forest, across the field behind your houses. You did it because you care about your children and your young nephew, and you want to keep them safe from any predators or orcs who would want to use the cover of the twilight. Do not deny it, for I have already confirmed you using this place. I lay in hiding there yesterday, and I saw you come and leave."

Salia heaved a big breath and crossed her hands. "Yes, I admit it. I'm the main hunter of the family, but many people still have reservations about a female hunter. My husband can talk and sell quite well, and so we work together like this."

"And when you were hunting three days ago, did you see Tarnik cross behind the houses?"

"No, I did not. He stayed at the cope."

"Splendid," Sherlock said. "Now we have proven that Tarnik could not have done it, for either Gerlind or Salia would have seen him if he had tried to get to Dahlia's house. In fact, with three people watching, Gerlind, Salia and Tarnik, it seems unlikely that someone would be able to get to the houses unseen. The murderer even had a lot of luck that he put the body into the courtyard between the houses, as that's the only place that wasn't watched."

"Wait!" Seral said. "If everything was so tightly watched, where did the orc come from?"

"From beyond the border, obviously. But the interesting question is not from where, but when. He already came there in the afternoon."

"And where did he hide all this time?" Salia asked.

Sherlock turned towards Salia's children. "Now is the time for you to come clean."

The room grew silent as everyone looked at them. After what felt like an eternity, the boy stepped forward. "Urik did not do it."

Suddenly, I understood. The children were Sherlock's clients who came to him after their orc playmate was captured. The boy might even have been the one who ran to Severns to send Sherlock's letter.

"Urik?" Salia said, shocked at her boy's words.

"Yes, he was with us shortly before the crash."

Salia grabbed him. "You insolent boy. What did you think, bringing such a dangerous orc into our home."

“Urik isn't dangerous. We’ve known him for quite some time. We always played in the forest, but he told us that there is peace between our lands and that trade will start between us. We were so happy that we invited him to finally see our home.”

“And he was just trying to get back home, when the unfortunate incident happened,” Sherlock said, and the boy only nodded.

“Can we really trust the memory of a child?” Mayor Durn asked.

“We can at least confirm that they knew each other. Let's bring Urik out here.”

Seral and Jeralt stood up and opened the sturdy door. They went in, and after a moment, they brought out the young orc.

I heard a short stifled yelp from Sherlock as he looked at Urik. “Green?”

Like most orcs, Urik’s skin was green. As he was quite young, appearing not older than fourteen winters, the green was pure and quite light. His hair was pitch black, shaved at the side. His strands hung down in a disheveled manner, showing his imprisonment of the last few days. His tusks had only started to break through his closed lips. He was lean, for some orcs it took some time until their muscles started growing; it would have been difficult for him to carry Dahlia out of her house. When he saw his friends, his expression lit up for just a moment, but then he turned his gaze back towards the floor.

Sherlock still stared at him, frozen. I put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Are you okay?”

He blinked a few times, which seemed to bring him out of his stupor. “I’m fine.” With that, he jumped back into action. “Urik, that is your name, isn't it? Can you tell me the names of the children present?”

Urik’s voice still had a childish sound to them, the characteristic tenor of his kind not yet coming through. “Finn, Melia, Sofia,” he turned around the room and pointed at Tarnik. “Tarink, I think.”

“Well done,” Sherlock said. “So, we can say for certain that they know each other, and it stands to reason that the children tell the truth. Urik had little reason to kill her, nor did he have the physical prowess to.”

“Are you an expert on how strong [orcs] are?” Mayor Durn said. “And he certainly had enough reason to kill if he was caught trying to escape.”

Sherlock turned to the young orc again. “Did you know the

woman that was killed?”

He nodded. “Dahlia.”

“How do you know her?”

That question, the orc didn't answer, turning away as much as possible with the knight and the knave at either side.

“Your parents are traders, correct?” Sherlock asked again.

Urik nodded again.

“And they also traded with Dahlia.”

The orc didn't move, but it spoke volumes.

Sherlock addressed everyone again. “See, there was no reason for him to kill Dahlia. He knew her, and even if she’d caught him, she would have only helped him.”

“That is preposterous, a clear lie,” the mayor complained. “Dahlia would never trade with these savages.”

“Oh, but she did. What resources are orcish tribes famous for?”

I thought for a moment, then said, “Silver from their mines.”

“I guessed so. Just like the silver cutlery in her house, just like the silver coins she gave to Felix, which by the way are fakes, minted with old molds that somehow made their way here, and just like this knife.” Sherlock picked up the supposed murder weapon. “This knife is not made to cut anything, no, it is a token of trust in orcish culture. And it belonged to Dahlia herself. I’m sure if we had the key to the chest in her home, we would find a lot of other things she traded over the border. It was easy for her to hide her trading, since she was the one who overlooked the storage in Grenald.

“Her trade partners from the other side are Urik’s parents, who are likely very worried, and we would do well to bring him back to them, lest they might start an attack to get him back or do revenge.”

The new information took a while to take hold.

After a few moments, Seral asked, “But if neither Felix, nor Tarnik, nor Salia, nor Urik did it, who did it?”

“When you have eliminated the impossible, then what remains, however improbable, must be the truth. There is only one person who could have done the murder without being seen.” He turned towards the table. “Mayor Durn.”

Silence spread in the room, but was soon broken by a deep laugh from the mayor that turned into a cough.

“I’m over eighty winters old. I’m way too weak for me to have

done that."

"So you say," Sherlock said. "However, your stature is still stocky, I have not met many that keep their bulk long after becoming sick. Plus, you have never asked for respite after standing for longer before."

"Ridiculous, I didn't have any reason to harm her."

"Oh, but you did: your hatred towards orcs. On that day, Dahlia came to you and told you about the peace and trading agreement with the orcs. That message travelled faster beyond the border. She opened up to you about her operation, which may soon have become legal, and showed you all she traded before. This all made you angry; never would you allow orcs in. And so, when you noticed that there was an orc also with Salia's children, you hatched a plan that the trade agreement with these foreigners will be destroyed before it is even in place. You ordered Tarnik to put out the empty barrels from the cellar, then you forged a note from Sofia to get him away from the house. When he left, you walked into Dahlia's house and strangulated her. After she was dead, you moved her into the courtyard and stabbed her with the knife that you found in the locked chest. Then, you waited until Urik tried to head home and you pushed over the barrels that would alert Felix or Tarnik. And lastly, you only had to get back inside, destroy the fake note, and no one would be the wiser."

"An interesting story," the mayor said calmly. "However, you have no way to prove your fantasies."

"But I have. Dahlia has scratched you on the arm."

"I don't stand for such disrespect."

"Mayor Durn," Jeralt said. "Can you show us your arm?"

The old mayor pursed his lips. "If it helps end this ridiculous play, I will."

He slowly rolled up his sleeve, first the forearm - unmarred, then the upper arm, and… nothing. There were no scratches on the old man's arm.

Sherlock's brows moved together. "I could've sworn..."

"If that is all, I will take my leave," Mayor Durn said. "And as it stands, the likeliest murderer is still the [orc], and so, if the knight of the queendom allows, we will fulfill punishment."

He gathered his walking stick, and Tarnik rushed to his side to help him walk. As they walked by me, the hairs on my back stood on end again.

“One moment,” I said. Before I could hear any complaint, I took the mayor’s still bare arm. When I moved closer with my fingers, I could feel magic energy moving just above the skin in well ordered paths. I supplied a bit of my own, disrupting the order. At once the cloaking enchantment broke, and three deep scratches appeared just by the elbow. I wouldn't be surprised if a similar enchantment had been put on Dahlia’s throat to cover up the marks.

Sherlock widened his eyes. “My sight must be worse than I remember if I didn't see the paint covering.”

I ground my teeth; I knew what Mayor Durn was. “Warlock.”

Suddenly, the demeanor of the mayor changed. The mantle of a sickly old man was thrown off, and he rose to his full height. At eighty, he would be in his prime.

He pushed me away with one arm, and I was thrown against the wall. Mayor Durn took his walking stick off the floor; no, not a walking stick, a disguised Warlock staff. He aimed the tip at Sherlock.

Jeralt, Seral and Salia quickly dragged the children out of line, but Sherlock didn't get out of the way, instead he faced the mayor with the knife still in hand, unaware of the danger. “You clearly are not a master of one-stick.”

I could feel the energy crackle to the tip of the staff. I jumped forward, and at the last moment diverted the staff upwards. A stream of fire shot out from the tip and exploded on the ceiling, turning a chunk of stone into dust, and more debris fell from above. Gladly, not large damage, but I direct hit still would’ve been lethal.

Sherlock fell back onto the floor in shock. I didn't lose any time and kicked the back of the mayor’s knee. He buckled, and I used the momentum to bring him to the floor. I wouldn't be able to keep him there long with my weight, but before I knew it, Seral and Jeralt had pinned him down and twisted the staff out of his grip.

“Never will I live in a world with them around,” Mayor Durn said.

I heard a short fizzle and the Warlock lost every tension in his body - dead. The only hint at what happened was a singed wound at the corner of his eye, where blood slowly started tripping out. He had used magic to fry his own brain.

After that, they brought everyone out into the fresh air. Everyone was physically okay, but the children had a shock that they

wouldn't forget for years. I couldn't heal that. Seral was tasked with bringing Urik back to the border, hopefully not too late. Jeralt was talking to other villagers to somehow organise the removal of the mayor's body. After making sure everyone was okay, I moved over to Sherlock, who knelt in the grass, investigating the mayor's staff.

He had snapped it in two and had somehow managed to pry out the crystal on top.

"There's no hidden flint lock mechanism, no compartment for gunpowder,..." he muttered.

"Are you okay," I asked.

At first I thought he wouldn't answer, then he said. "Yes, it's just… a lot of my work is figuring out what is impossible and possible, and it seems like I have to re-evaluate the line." He suddenly turned to me. "Can you tell me, have you ever heard of Great Britain, or maybe Belgium?"

"No."

"And England, France?"

I furrowed my brows, that did bring a tiny bit of recognition. "Maybe in old fables?"

"That might explain the similarities of our speech." He scratched his chin. "Tell me, Watson, are you human?"

I checked my cap, maybe it had slipped off in the scuffle, but no, it still covered the top of my ears.

"That cap has not fooled me for even a second," Sherlock said. "It's not part of your uniform, and it is not cold enough to need it."

I dropped my hands to my side. "Yes, I'm an elf."

"Elf." He said, his eyes twinkling with interest. "And it seems that humans, elves and orcs are not the only sentient species here."

"Of course not. How could you not know?"

Sherlock didn't offer an answer. "Watson, if it is in any way possible, I would like to go with you back to the capital."

Our entourage spent the night in Grenald, then the next day we already prepared for our journey back to Indino and then the capital. Therefore, we would miss the funeral of Dahlia, and of Mayor Durn. Upon hearing of the former's death, Urik's parents wanted to attend, but to not go too far and bring in orcs after the whole scene, they settled with just giving a wreath to be buried with Dahlia's body, a practice in their culture.

The sun was close to its zenith when we were ready to go. After

musing the unicorn-mules with great interest, Sherlock took place beside me in the cart, and once we were a few minutes in, he asked me to remove my cap. Apprehensively, I did what he asked and his eyes widened.

“Pointy ears, interesting,” he said. “So, how old are you really?”

“I'm 63 winters old.”

“We both know you're older than this, Watson,” Sherlock answered. “As such, I’m sure you have enough stories to tell on that long journey.”

“Hendralica,” I corrected him again, though only half-heartedly. I wondered if I didn't make a mistake taking him with us. I would have to observe him and make sure he didn't find out too much.

And so, brother, this is the story of how I met a strange ‘detective’ at the border, and how we solved a murder together that might have saved the peace with our neighbours. I’m certain this is not the last story I will tell you about Sherlock Holmes.

I hope to see you again soon.

Your loving sister

Add.: With Garrett's help, I found documents for a Military Warlock named Adurn, which might be Mayor Durn’s real name. In the third orcish war, his Warlock squad was almost entirely wiped out by an orcish ambush. It's always the same: Violence begets violence, hate begets hate. I’m glad that this time, we broke that circle and showed that humans and orcs can be friends and live peacefully, as long as there is no one conspiring against it.

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Scotland Yard, despite Inspector Lestrade’s best efforts, had not found any clue where Sherlock Holmes was. This marked a week without any news of my friend. It was not the first time that he had disappeared for some time, but I had the sinking feeling that this time, it was different.

I arrived by cab back at 221B Baker street. As soon as I entered, Mrs. Hudson came up to me.

“Dr. Watson, he’s back,” she said. “Mister Holmes.”

I hurried up the stairs and fell into our apartment. The curtains were drawn, dipping the room into a twilight darkness that my eyes needed to adjust to. And there, in his favourite chair, sat Sherlock,

smoking his pipe.

“Sherlock,” I said. “Where have you been?”

“On a case,” he simply answered. His voice sounded rough.

“You sound sick, let me open the window and let in some air.”

I walked over to the drawn curtains and pushed them aside, then opened the window. Fresh autumn air fell in, though it wasn't too cold yet.

I turned back to Sherlock and froze. Something was off; in the light, he certainly had the same facial features as my roommate, but he wasn't entirely the same as I remembered him. I tried to attribute this change to a rough time the last few days, but I couldn't. The way he lay reclined in his chair was just slightly different than I was used to from my friend. But if it wasn't him, who was he? Surprisingly, I had an answer. Not long before Sherlock disappeared, he talked about a young, French thief, who had a talent for disguises.

“Arsene Lupin,” I said.

After a moment, the man in Sherlock’s chair started to laugh. He now spoke with a french accent that he hid before.

“Well done, Dr. Wilson. He has taught you well.”

“Watson,” I corrected him.

“Yes, I suppose enough time has passed until then.”

“You have made a mistake coming here, I will inform Scotland Yard of you immediately.” I headed for the door, but Arsene Lupin continued.

“I wouldn't have come here if I didn't have an escape route ready. Also, I did not come here as an adversary, but as an ally.”

“An ally for what?”

“To solve the disappearance of Sherlock Holmes.”

I stopped at the door and turned back.

“What do you know about his disappearance?”

“It's not something he has planned for, that is for certain. As far as I could gather, he has travelled to Belgium for a case...”

“Yes, I remember. There was a woman who had disappeared without a trace, and her husband was arrested on grounds of killing her, but Sherlock had his doubts.”

“Exactly. I looked into it, and it seems something must’ve happened during Sherlock’s investigation that he befell the same fate as the woman.”

“The police already follow this thread.”

“Yes, but you know how often they miss the important clues,” the thief said. “I propose something different.”

“And what are you proposing?”

“I’m quite fond of Mr. Holmes and I have a lot of respect for him. I wish to see him well just as much as you do. So, with your knowledge of Sherlock, and my brain, we might have the best chance of finding him.”

I wanted to shut down this ridiculous idea immediately, but my worry held me back. If Sherlock was in danger, I should do everything I can to save him.

“You really think we can find Sherlock?”

The Frenchman smiled. “If we work together, I’m sure we'll find him before a month has gone.”

I pursed my lips. “Okay, but we stay within the law.”

“As much as possible.” Arsene Lupin’s smile got wider.

I wondered if I had just made a big mistake.

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading. This is the first story I made that uses some non-original characters, I hope I used them in a respectable manner.
For the style, I tried to be as faithful to the classics as I could. The idea for this story actually originated from a Tumblr post, which said that Sherlock in a Fantasy world would just deduce the world's rules, find an elf girl and call her Watson, and then go on solving crimes.

I only have a few vague ideas to follow up this story, and only if people are interested.

Best,
Symon Pude